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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 003492

SIPDIS

NSC FOR DENNIS WILDER AND LIZ PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/26/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: MOB SHUTS MAIN BANGKOK AIRPORT, ARMY CHIEF URGES
NEW ELECTIONS

REF: A. BANGKOK 3454 (DEMO STARTS STRONG)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 3143 (SOMCHAI DECLINES TO RESIGN)

[1](#)C. BANGKOK 2610 (EMERGENCY DECREE INVOKED)

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Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reason: 1.4 (b and d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) Thousands of anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protestors swarmed into Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi international airport on the night of November 25, forcing the airport's closure, which continues as of COB November 26. The Army Commander led a news conference late in the day November 26, ruling out a coup but calling for Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat to dissolve the parliament in order to resolve the political crisis and for the PAD to end its airport siege. King Bhumibol's Principal Private Secretary told the Ambassador that the King would not intervene in the PAD-RTG standoff; the military would not launch a coup; a compromise could emerge; and he urged that the USG not/not issue any statements on the matter. The Ambassador also weighed in with a top MFA official and an influential confidante of the Queen on the need for a political solution; the MFA PermSec said MFA was trying to assist foreigners stranded by the airport closure. PM Somchai is expected to return to Thailand after 1900 Thai time and convene a Cabinet meeting. Initial reaction from both the PAD and government supporters to Anupong's suggestion has been negative. Post's suggested press guidance, for use on an if-asked basis, is in para 10.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: Leaders of the PAD publicly committed themselves to bringing down the current government through the mass action that began on November 24 (ref A). The PAD's disruption of international airport operations is much more significant than the four month-long occupation of the Government House compound, given the importance of international tourism to the Thai economy. The Army Commander's public recommendation is the second time in two months he has pushed Somchai to resign or dissolve the house (ref B). Based on Somchai's refusal to follow Anupong's suggestion in October, we suspect the governing party and its

sympathizers will resist this time as well and express outrage at Anupong's pressure, although Anupong insisted the proposal he raised is constitutional and represents the only way out of the crisis. For its part, PAD leaders flatly rejected Anupong's proposal for house dissolution, since it would lead to new elections that pro-Thaksin parties likely would win, yet again. End Summary and Comment.

KING'S SECRETARY HOPES FOR COMPROMISE

¶3. (C) The Ambassador discussed the political situation by phone with Arsa Sarasin, King Bhumibol's Principal Private Secretary, on November 26, prior to Army Commander Anupong Paojinda's press conference. Arsa said the King would not intervene in the ongoing political standoff between the PAD and the RTG. Arsa expected that Thai business leaders would make an appeal for calm and for the reopening of Suvarnabhumi airport; he believed that the RTG and PAD would be able to reach some sort of compromise after Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat's return to Thailand from the APEC summit in Peru.

¶4. (C) In a separate call, Piya Malakul, a PAD supporter with close ties to Queen Sirikit, told the Ambassador that he believed the RTG and the PAD could reach a political solution, but they would make no progress until after Somchai's return. (Somchai was scheduled to return in the late afternoon or evening of November 26, but it is unclear when or where Somchai's flight will land.)

NO COUP...

¶5. (C) Arsa Sarasin assured the Ambassador that the military

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would not launch a coup. Embassy military officers have received similar assurances at the working level, and Anupong reiterated this point several times in his news conference. The Ambassador received a call in the early afternoon of November 26 from MFA Permanent Secretary Virsakdi Futrakul, moments before a meeting convened by Army Commander Anupong with various senior RTG officials and other prominent civilians. Virasakdi sought the Ambassador's views; the Ambassador stressed that the Army should not launch a coup; the RTG had various legal and political tools at its disposal, and the PAD protests represented a political problem that should be met with a political solution. Virasakdi acknowledged the Ambassador's views and speculated that Somchai likely would consider a range of options for resolving the current standoff.

... JUST A HEAVY-HANDED SUGGESTION

¶6. (SBU) Anupong convened a three-hour Monitoring Committee for the Situation/Unrest in Bangkok mid-afternoon which involved all Ministry PermSecs, leading business organizations/leaders, rectors of Thai universities, and other top civilians. After the meeting concluded, Anupong led a press conference. He suggested that the political crisis be resolved by the Prime Minister dissolving parliament, with new elections to take place per constitutional mechanisms. Anupong also called for the PAD to end its protests. Anupong emphasized that his suggestion was constitutional, represented the only way out of the crisis, and was in the country's best interests. Anupong ruled out a coup and also ruled out the use of force against protestors; he indicated, however, that, should the Prime Minister reject this suggestion, various elements of the RTG would cease to recognize the legitimacy of the Somchai administration. He implied Somchai should comply within one week.

AIRPORT SHUT DOWN

¶7. (SBU) Anupong's action came against the backdrop of a PAD takeover of Bangkok Suvarnabhumi international airport on the night of November 25, resulting in the airport's closure. With several thousand demonstrators still at the facility on November 26, the airport remained closed; PAD said publicly Somchai must resign before the airport can reopen. MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi told the Ambassador that the MFA was working to assist Americans and other foreigners stranded in Thailand by the airport's closure. (note: PAD protestors also remain at Bangkok's Don Muang domestic airport; some international flights have landed there, and domestic flights are operating normally, but there are no international departures from Don Muang. Our ACS section will be staffed from 0700-1900 on the Thanksgiving holiday in order to continue to assist stranded U.S. travelers).

¶8. (SBU) Police publicly said the demonstrators had to leave Suvarnabhumi by noon on November 26, but they refrained from taking action immediately on the expiration of that deadline.

Security officials have told us that the police would not clear the airport of demonstrators without an order to do so from the Prime Minister. Some of our contacts believe Somchai will declare a state of emergency under the 2005 Emergency Decree in order to respond to the demonstrations, though it is not clear how Somchai will react to Anupong's suggestions.

¶8. (C) Comment: Declaring a state of emergency may streamline the exercise of government authority and permit officials to curtail certain freedoms, but it depends on how it is implemented. In September, then-Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej responded to PAD protests by declaring a state of emergency (ref C), with little visible effect. Post has e-mailed the text of the 2005 Emergency Decree to EAP/MLS. End Comment.

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EXPLOSIONS AND SCUFFLES

¶9. (SBU) There have been various reports of minor disturbances in Bangkok in connection with the PAD's activities:

- A scuffle between PAD sympathizers and pro-government people broke out on the night of November 25 on Vipawadee-Rangsit road in Bangkok, with up to 11 people injured.

- Small explosive devices detonated in at least three venues (Vipawadee-Rangsit road, Rama V road, and near Suvarnabhumi airport) in the pre-dawn hours of November 26, injuring several people. There were also reports of gunfire at those venues.

- The Ministry of Public Health announced publicly at mid-day on November 26 that approximately 20 people had been injured in connection with the PAD's demonstrations, and approximately five remained hospitalized.

- A Thai staff member working for the National Democratic Institute was robbed after PAD guards boarded a bus near Don Muang airport on the night of November 24; the guards allegedly took passengers' food and money.

USG PUBLIC STATEMENTS

¶10. (C) Arsa Sarasin stated emphatically to the Ambassador that any USG public statements on Thailand's turmoil would be "extremely unhelpful." Recognizing the limitations on Washington officials' ability to avoid comment, we recommend the following guidance (if not overtaken by further developments) be used on an if-asked basis:

Q: What is your view on the situation in Thailand?

A: We continue to monitor carefully the situation in Thailand. We are concerned about reports of violence between pro- and anti-government groups in recent weeks. We understand that these are isolated incidents, however, and that most demonstrations have been non-violent, and that the authorities are using peaceful means to try to resolve the disruptions that have occurred.

Q: Are you concerned about the safety of American citizens?

A: I would refer you to the notices published online by the Embassy in Bangkok and on the State Department website; we urge American citizens to avoid the areas of demonstrations.

Q: The protestors are calling for the downfall of the government, which took office after an election that you said "was conducted in a free and fair manner." Are you willing to condemn the protestors? Is the Army Commander's call for new elections a form of a coup?

A: We are not in a position to comment on the political agenda of the demonstrators, or the proposals for how to respond to the crisis. This is an issue for the Thais to resolve. We would like to see events in Thailand proceed peacefully and in accordance with the constitution and the rule of law.

JOHN